

6-1-2009

May X: A trip to Carter Country

Elizabeth Stell '10
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Stell, Elizabeth '10 (2009) "May X: A trip to Carter Country," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol52/iss2/15>

This Regular Feature is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

A trip to Carter Country

I never really understood why Furman insisted on calling the new “Maymester” a “May Experience” — until I had the opportunity to take a course for myself. After my three weeks in Helen Lee Turner’s class titled “Jimmy Carter and Southern Baptists,” I came to fully appreciate the meaning of “May Experience.”

As spring semester flew by and the plans for the course began to solidify, I grew more and more excited to learn about what our small class of nine students would be doing. Not only would we learn about President Carter and the way in which his personal theology had developed and influenced his life, but we were actually going to meet the man himself!

Being the nerd that I am, I tend to be especially star-struck by “presidential sightings,” so I was more thrilled about this aspect of the class than any other. As if I weren’t excited enough, Dr. Turner had one more idea that surfaced only a couple of days before we left for Plains, Ga., the president’s hometown. She suggested that my mother, Charlotte Evans Finnegan ’86 (a former student of hers), come along for the trip. I had told Dr. Turner my mom was jealous that I was going to meet President Carter, so when I called with Dr. Turner’s proposition, Mom said yes immediately.

So it was that on Saturday, May 9, we left Greenville for the five-hour journey to Plains. The time passed quickly as our anticipation built.

Early Sunday morning, we headed to Maranatha Baptist Church where President Carter would be teaching Sunday school. We arrived early so that we could have the best seats in the house, and we were successful. What an amazing experience! At 85, President Carter still has it all together, which was very evident from his personal interactions with the congregation as he tried to get a feel for where everyone was from. His lesson was well taught and was followed by a traditional Southern Baptist church service.

After church, we were able to talk briefly with the president and have our picture taken with him. Later we saw the Carters eating lunch at a local restaurant, and he and Rosalynn once again spoke to us.

We spent the rest of the day exploring Plains

and getting a glimpse into the former president’s life, past and present. We visited the farm where he grew up and the school he attended, as well as his campaign headquarters. On our way home, we stopped at the Carter Center in Atlanta and were able to learn more about his activities in such areas as diplomacy, social justice and Habitat for Humanity.

Upon arriving back in Greenville, our class commenced as would any other, and we engaged in in-depth discussions of President Carter and Southern Baptists in general. We learned that his core beliefs of advancing human rights and alleviating suffering are deeply rooted in his Southern Baptist upbringing and in such traditional denominational principles as “priesthood of all believers” and “unity in diversity.” Yet one

of the main reasons he cited in making the difficult decision to disassociate himself from the SBC after 65 years was that he no longer saw those core beliefs reflected in what he considered the rigid creeds espoused by the national convention.

Although the classroom work was educational and enjoyable, it was the trip to Plains and the personal encounter with President Carter that set this class apart from any that I have taken. It was by no means a typical class, but it is for that very reason that it is one of the best Furman experiences I have had.

— ELIZABETH STELL ’10

The author is a Spanish major from Fayetteville, Ga.

Furman folks meet the president. From left, President Carter, Daniel Spisak ’12, Courtney Orr ’11, Elizabeth Stell ’10, Charlotte Evans Finnegan ’86, Betsy Moseley ’74, Caitlin Sylvester ’12, Helen Lee Turner, Rosalynn Carter. Photo courtesy Helen Lee Turner.

